

**Senate Commerce Committee Hearing**  
**“Do Parental Advisory Stickers Inform Parents and Consumer”**

Thank you for having me here today. This is a subject I have long thought important. From the start, I would like my comments to be considered not in the context of restricting adults freedom of speech, but rather in consideration of a potential threat to children and young people.

Although music and entertainment have long been considered controversial, two dramatic changes have taken place over the last decade that must be addressed. Firstly, provocative images of violence and sex are reaching younger and younger children. Secondly, there is a new and significantly more troubling aspect to the violence portrayed in some music that makes this a serious social problem. While music once inspired introspection and personal experimentation the consequences of that experience were born by the individual. However today's music commonly glamorizes violence and aggression towards others, often innocent “victims”. This creates a social problem - the effects of which we are realizing daily. It is widely accepted that music and entertainment played a significant role in inspiring the evolution from the values of the 50's into the sex, drugs and rock & roll of the 70's and 80's. However, it is often the same voices that reminisce with nostalgia on music's role in past social change, who will not accept entertainments current role in the celebration of sex, violence and aggression, which are a part of today's culture.

My background is in the music industry. For over 15 years I have worked with numerous artists, record companies and publishers and gave little thought to the actual message music was sending children. 3 years ago my engagement made me responsible for two children aged 8 and 11. As an adult, I had long forgotten the attention and interest children have in the details of music. The image of the artist, their lyrics and ideas are being studied, memorized, and absorbed by kids shaping their images of life just as it had generations before us. A few years ago these images began to leap from the artist works of fantasy to the nightly news recital of facts. Living in L.A., the relation between music and the escalation of violence seemed far too real. As gang violence peaked, gangster rap records were topping the charts. While marijuana use amongst teens was once again exploding, so was its popularization in more and more hit records and artist personas. I attended youth meetings and other events at which young people were making it clear that their problems with the law were an outgrowth of role modeling popular heroes the same role modeling that had driven me as a teenager to believe and conform to the attitudes of my time. The influences of television, music and films are not subtle, they are obvious. It is ironic that we all question whether or not the extreme violence in films and entertainment today has an effect on our kids, and then shake our heads and wonder why our children are shooting their classmates.

It was clear to everyone that music was influencing our culture, from the inner-city to

suburbia. As the violence increased, we thought the industry would take some action to address the obvious issues. Everyone knew that boundaries were being tested particularly where young children were concerned and yet rather than get proactive, to preserve their rights, they tried to ignore the problem. Once it was clear that the industry was not going to acknowledge the issue, I and others within my company created a publication called the *Family Entertainment Guide*. Because of our unbiased informative stance, we expected industry cooperation. What we found, however, was denial and fear. Denial of the problem which would never reach their privileged lives and “fear” of losing a cash cow if parents got hold of our information. So we are here today to look further at a problem that has a very simple solution.

Let me give you some quick facts and personal insights into the music industry that others may not be willing to give you.

### **Record Company Cultures**

Many top record company executives privately share your concerns about the content of music, yet will not interfere with what looks good on the bottom line. Music and entertainment is created in a unique culture that is often driven by a very young staff, interested only in the values important to their peers. Many senior executives would prefer that their labels stay away from this form of music, but again senior executives are driven by a bottom line that feeds fat salaries not hundreds of thousands, but million dollar salaries often with significant bonuses. Take for example two key figures. Doug Morris who worked with Interscope at Time Warner, received tens of millions of dollars in bonuses and severance pay upon his departure to MCA, and a recent partner in Priority Records (an independent label known for gangster rap) sold his interest to EMI for over \$30 million.

Ironically if you look at the majority of rappers and rockers their fleeting fortunes are gone just a few short years after their success. I wonder sometimes if these artists understand how they and their culture are being exploited.

That said, keep in mind that these independent and major labels did not create these records in a vacuum. They have obviously tapped into a need or point of interest in our culture. This is not the case of an industry foisting upon the public something it does not want. As a matter of fact, the major labels were late on the gangster rap scene, and it was the independent record companies who rose from garages and dorm houses to become multimillion-dollar success stories. It was the independents' success in an area in which a major could not compete, that drove the majors' acquisition of rap and hard rock labels and acts.

### **Re Stickers**

It is a known fact that stickers do not work. The RIAA and NARM's own studies show

that most parents do not know what a sticker means (go into Roula and Alanis Morissette). The irony is that the kids who do know what these labels mean, treat them like a badge of honor. The film industry has learned from the MPAA experience that an R and PG rating has value at the box office. Kids and Teens will not go to G-rated films. Around the world, music content and America's export of violent entertainment is an issue. In Australia there are three levels of stickers. In Germany over 100 groups are currently banned for content and in the U.K. video sales of *The Exorcist* are still banned.

## **Who Buys Hard Core Rap and Rock?**

Industry sales reports show that rap and hard rock sells to younger teens, and has little appeal to adults. Most marketing directors, let alone psychologists, agree that the more profane, base and exploitative messages appeal to the younger and more immature minds.

### **About Marketing Records**

In fairness, recently things have changed. Since the efforts of Dr. Tucker, Senator Lieberman and Mr. Bennett, along with others here, I have had projects at record companies where they have shown concern over the content of the records and have refused to sign exploitative artist.

However in general the record industry is aware of music's shock value and the power of shock content, and they exploit it for all it's worth. A full-page article in *Rolling Stone* magazine lauding a hot new artist for their hard-core antics sells more records than any full-page ad ever could. The bonus is that while you have to pay for an ad, an article is free, and one good article inspires more play on radio, print and powerful word-of-mouth promotion. Any marketing director at a major label will tell you that this is the way to create an artist's persona, build a career, and sell records. I have sat in major label meeting where the A&R people have stated that a record was "not controversial enough." Shock sells, and it sells best to teens that is who our business targets. A billion-dollar industry has focussed an awesomely powerful marketing machine on a segment of the population that is vulnerable and "in development".

## **Why kids are so vulnerable to music?**

Music is a unique form of entertainment we discover on our own, unlike film or television, which we start watching with our parents. This family aspect of T.V. and Film gives parents some understanding and control over the child's T.V. and film diet. However with music it is common for parents to react to their child's music by saying such things as "go to room if you want to listen to that junk" or telling them to "turn down the noise". This sends kids and their music into a very isolated environment.

Music defines the identity of many adolescents, and when children begin to define their own identity, it is the music that allows them to separate their identity from that of their parents finding an affinity with other kids and explore new-found interests. If that area of interest is violent and angry, sexual or drug-oriented, so can be the influences. In the seventies “drug oriented music” glamorizing drug use was very popular, and in turn we had almost epidemic “youth drug culture”. Which came first, the drug culture or the drug oriented music is irrelevant in light of the fact that, like today, one has began to feed off the other. While we often hear the phrase, “we survived the 60's or the 70's,” we should remember that many did not. With every Hendrix and Joplin, how many kids' lives were changed for the worse by what is now widely accepted as a failed social era?

Today, our pop culture environment is filled with lies and half-truths that popularize misleading images without showing the real consequences and long-term impact. Just as we feel that fine art has the ability to inspire great thought, and seek to expose our children to this, base expression or exploitative art also have inspirational abilities. The problem is that the people responsible for bringing fantasy into perspective the parents and teachers do have not the necessary resources or the influence over the children to combat the well funded marketing machine. Worst of all, those who could have an influence, do not have the necessary information to do so. Today's parents do not know what the music is saying or teaching. Ask a parent about their son or daughter's music, and they know very little.

### **The proliferation of global information access**

The rapid advancement of information access is a phenomenon from which our children will benefit only if we maintain free speech and freedom of expression. However, the power of new technology, coupled with the exploitative nature of the media today, is spoiling the party.

The information revolution is bringing more information to our children than ever before imaginable. While much of that information is thought to be educational, entertainment is in fact the driving factor in the development of these new technologies. Intel has stated time and again that new games and entertainment systems are driving demand and development of greater processor speed. As a result, younger children have access to more entertainment than ever before and yet parents know very little about what is coming into the home.

### **We think we have a solution**

When we first published the *Family Entertainment Guide*, many people in Washington were debating these issues and using our publication as a research resource. Everyone had concerns about entertainment content, and yet no-one really had solutions. In fact, I was told that many politicians did not really want solutions, they just

wanted to raise issues that would bring attention to themselves. I do not believe that, and yet I think we have talked a little too long about music and its influences on children, without any real dialogue regarding solutions.

Parents cannot abdicate their obligation to government and government cannot become the parent. We believe the solution is to empower parents with the information they need to parent. To the extent that government can insure parents have access to the information they need that is what government can offer. Parents must be empowered to parent. No-one knows better what is appropriate for a particular child than the parents.

The *Family Entertainment Guide* listens to and reviews the lyrics of all major releases, giving parents a simple unbiased synopsis and perspective from which to make informed decisions. Our information allows consumers to make informed decisions before purchasing. To this end, we are now using the information revolution to favor parents. Our reviews are currently linked to online and Internet retailers, enabling parents to listen to a sample of a record, read our parental reviews, and make an informed decisions while shopping online. Further, as new forms of interactive media emerge, we are linking our reviews to television broadcasts of video, and can provide similar information over radio and through other forms of media. As the market develops for this form of information, parents and consumers will have a variety of viewpoints from which to choose. While the *Family Entertainment Guide* strives to maintain unbiased reviews, void of any religious perspective or social agenda, other parents may seek information from other sources. Varied information sources are available for parents today. *Entertainment Weekly* (a Time Warner Publication) provides parental reviews of movies, and this section of their publication has been very popular. *Focus on the Family* and the Catholic church offer varying positions and reviews of music from a religious perspective, while Ted Bahr produces a Christian movie guide. Each one of these could be a valuable parental resource, but if you remember, when I opened, I said fear and anger met the launch of our magazine. This fear and anger has limited the development of this solution.

## **Parents Rights to Equal Information Access**

Retail and record companies' fear and anger have impeded our information from reaching parents. Retailers refused to make it available, and the record companies will not support us in the same way as they support entertainment reviews which report from an aesthetic perspective. Ironically, it was the retailers who claimed to serve the family, such as Blockbuster, that were the most emphatic about not allowing this information in their store. This was out of fear of how their family consumer would react when informed about the records that these "family retailers sell". We do not have the resources to break through this barrier, and need to have the playing field leveled.

The true industry fear is summed up in a analogy once made to me by a reporter: He

said, "In the 60's, the seat belt was made available as an option. In the 70's, it was law that every car must provide them as standard equipment, and in the 80's, it became law that everyone must wear them. Now we have airbags, etc." He went on to ask, "By requiring this information, wouldn't we be standing on the doorstep of censorship?" My response was, by denying parents, educators and others our information aren't you engaging in censorship. I do not want censorship, yet I do not want to live in a world where we continue to glamorize ignorance and stereotype the races playing to the basest elements of society just to turn a buck. I have faith in the public, and our system. Information brings understanding.

Despite the growing fears, the development of the information revolution may ultimately favor the family and empower parents provided we can ensure "equal information access". Once information is available, informed people will start to make intelligent choices, and those choices will change the market. Who knows? You may be surprised when you discover what rappers and rockers have to say. In the true spirit of our democracy and free market, those that have talent will gain a bigger voice, while the one-hit-wonders, will simply fade away.

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